Flesh and Blood

Rotting and Relating in the 'Age of the Market'

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Abstract

Normative understandings of Mongolian kinship have long revolved around metaphors of flesh, blood and bone, while substantive approaches have focused on materials such as umbilical cords and photographic montages. In this article, I argue that the flesh of livestock has been largely overlooked in considerations of Mongolian kinship, and I address the role of meat in making and maintaining relations, both among people and between people and their homelands (*nutag*). In pastoral Mongolia, herd animals enact and enable a wide range of social relations. However, in the ethnographic context discussed here – the Ulaanbaatar ger districts – urban-rural migrants live at a distance from animals. No longer herders, their access to *nutag* meat is reliant on their connections to countryside relatives, rendering meat a kinship-making substance in new ways. This paper begins the work of analysing the shift from animal to meat-based enactments of relatedness in the age of the market.

Keywords

meat – Mongolia – kinship – relatedness – rural-urban divides – substance – urbanisation

1 Summer Slaughter

My first morning back in Mongolia in summer 2017, I awoke to find my 'Mongolian parents' Badrakh and Ulzii's *ger* district homestead (*hashaa*) had

been turned into an impromptu outdoor abattoir.¹ Ulzii's older sister and her husband Bataa Ah had driven overnight into the city with 15 live sheep and one goat on the back of their old flat-bed truck. Badrakh and Ulzii's local relatives all gathered at the *hashaa* to take part in the processing of the animals. One by one each sheep was held on its back by a man, while another made a vertical cut near the breastbone before plunging his hand into the chest cavity to sever the aorta with the stroke of a finger.² Once the animal bled out, the cut was extended and the innards removed into a large metal bowl; the blood was collected in another container, scooped out of the body cavity with a bowl. While the women began the work of sorting out the edible offal from parts that would go to the dogs and washing the former, the men hung the carcasses by the ankle to skin and butcher the meat. Processing 16 animals took all day. Children helped with the labour according to their gender and were sent to sell sheep heads and innards to passers-by who called through the gaps in the fence. Once the work was complete, the relatives enjoyed the usual meal that accompanies a day of slaughter: boiled offal, shared from a central bowl and eaten with a knife passed from person to person.

Following the meal, every household was given a share of meat to take home. The next day, Bataa Ah drove the remaining carcasses to the market to sell, thereby transforming his animal wealth into cash needed to pay for his children's upcoming school supplies and a visit to the dentist for his wife.

Scenes such as the one that took place that day in late June are commonplace in contemporary Mongolia, at least within the relative space and privacy of a *ger* district *hashaa* on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar. With almost half the Mongolian population now residing in the capital city (NSOM 2020), people with kinship networks that span countryside and city seek to make the most of their respective rural and urban residences. The countryside is still fundamental for food (meat and dairy) production, while the city represents opportunities for education and access to cash (Sneath 2006b).

Ethnographies of pastoral life in Mongolia abound with descriptions of the importance of the 'five snout animals' (*tavan hoshuu mal*) (Bristley 2020: 65; High 2007) and the intimate, symbiotic relationship between herders and their animals (Fijn 2011). Livestock have long been demonstrated to be vital to pastoralists in terms of reckoning and constituting one's place in a living universe

1 The names of people and districts are pseudonyms. The honorifics *Ah* [older brother] and *Egch* [older sister] follow the names of those older than me, with two exceptions. In reality, I call Badrakh *Aaw* [father] and Ulzii *Eej* [mother].

2 This is the same technique mandated by Chinggis Khan during the time of the Mongol Empire (Atwood 2004: 183; May 2019: 155–6).

of relations, both human and non-human (Bumochir *et al.* 2020; Empson 2011). Meat, on the other hand, is featured in discussions of hospitality (Humphrey 2012: S66–S67) and rural domestic commensality (Ruhlmann 2019).³ While much has been written on the importance of kin and friend networks in rural Mongolia (Humphrey & Sneath 1999: 136, 283), for the most part meat does not feature in these discussions. Instead, it is animals that are bought, sold, bartered and given. Thus, although relational networks provide an important infrastructure in Mongolia enacted by flows of material goods and acts of assistance (Sneath 2006a), in rural contexts it is more likely to be animals, rather than meat, that build extra-household relationships, whether through commercial transactions or acts of gifting.

In contrast to Mongolia's pastoralists, most people in Ulaanbaatar do not keep animals. No longer having direct access to animals, however, has not changed their desire to eat meat. Especially valued is meat that comes from a family's countryside homeland (*nutag*). Accessing this meat relies on maintaining relations with countryside relatives; a reality which places meat in an indexical relationship to the status of one's ties to one's *nutag*: those who have access to homeland meat have maintained relations, those who have maintained relations have access to homeland meat. Meat thus represents a new and, as yet, uncharted material by which Mongolians enact relations. Shaped by the distance urbanisation and internal migration are putting between people and their homelands, I suggest meat transfers are gaining primacy in the materialisation of kin relations across city-country divides. Rather than treating meat as just another 'thing', however, this paper begins the work of examining its specific material and conceptual affordances, its substantive potency and its material fragility, and how these inflect kin relations already stretched by socio-economic hardship. Brought to the fore by the focus on meat as an unstable and interstitial material, this paper reflects on the fragility and ambiguous obligations of kin ties in 'the age of the market'.⁴

2 Flesh, Blood and Rot

Following the intervention of David Schneider (1984), who argued that the study of kinship was based on an ethnocentric projection of the European

3 But see two exceptional and fascinating works by Benedikte Møller Kristensen (2019), on mutton and its dangers among the Dukha, and Victoria Soyon Peemot (2017), on Tyvan pastoralists' hippophagy.

4 *Zah zeeliin üye*, the Mongolian term for the post-socialist era (see Wheeler 2004).

folk concept of blood, anthropology turned away from making distinctions between 'real' and 'classificatory' relations. Recast as the study of 'relatedness', the subsequent theoretical turn recognised that, while the idea of being related might be universal, its forms are highly diverse (Carsten 1995; 2000; 2004; Franklin & McKinnon 2001) and 'any relationship constitution in terms of procreation, filiation, or descent can also be made post-natally or performed by culturally appropriate action' (Sahlins 2011: 3). In line with wider materialist developments, the discipline likewise shifted towards a focus on the substances of kinship-making.

Substantive perspectives emphasise the processual dimensions of relatedness, namely that relations are not generated in a singular moment, such as that of birth, but are built over time, through daily acts such as feeding and eating (Carsten 2001). Primary to many of these studies are thus alimentary materials, such as rice and breast-milk, which are shown to produce relatedness through commensality (e.g. Carsten 1995; 2000; Janowski 2007; Lambert 2000). Such foodstuffs are either recognised as 'substantive vectors' (Hutchinson 2000: 55) through which to actualise relations, or substances that through being incorporated into people's bodies by consumption generate relatedness as an outcome of shared bodily substance (Bloch 1985; Carsten 1995; Godelier 1998; Sahlins 2011).

Substantive approaches to relatedness are characterised by their theoretical engagement with the particular materialities of kinship-making substances. Janet Carsten's study of blood, for example, engages with its liquidness, its redness, its association with both vitality and death in order to probe the 'connections between material qualities of substances and the relations that their transfers set in train' (Carsten 2011: 23). Their material focus notwithstanding, however, substantive approaches to kinship generally situate themselves in an intellectual genealogy that builds on Claude Lévi-Strauss' famous dictum that certain things are 'good to think' and remain in the realm of the metaphor. In contrast, this study of meat as a relation-making material draws on methodological approaches emerging from the ontological turn to push through the metaphorical barrier and collapse the meat-as-concept and meat-as-thing division (Henare *et al.* 2007; Holbraad & Pedersen 2017: 199–238). Aiming to interrogate the materiality of meat in ways that 'take seriously' its material characteristics and their consequences for meat-based relations, it raises the question of meat's 'conceptual affordances' and the possibilities these generate for anthropological conceptualisation (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017: 218). Flesh, blood and bone appear here, then, not only as metaphors, but in all their

meaty glory: produced by slaughter, relished in consumption, infused with the taste of wild herbs and prone to denaturation and decay.

Especially when keeping in mind that meat is an inherently perishable substance, this approach also adds critical aspects to the study of relatedness. Forasmuch as the attention to commensality and sharing substance can be praised for reorientating scholars towards the materiality of relations (cf. Miller 2007), the foodstuffs through which relations are made may too often become conceptually detached from their conditions of production and relations of procurement. In other words, the focus on the alimentary material may eclipse a discussion of, for example, the land and labour needed to produce it. While substantive studies of relatedness have indeed looked at the incorporation of 'new objects' as kinship vectors in societies undergoing rapid social and economic change (e.g. Hutchinson 2000), this study reverses the analytical assumption that socio-economic conditions are a 'context' for changing relations and instead mobilises meat as a perspectival lens through which to apprehend experiences of social and economic rupture (cf. Højer & Pedersen 2019). Furthermore, thinking *through* meat highlights the ambiguities, fragility and uncertain obligations of kin relations (Delaplace 2014; Højer 2004; 2019) that might otherwise be lost when relatedness is conceptualised *a priori* in terms that produce 'a warm, fuzzy glow', as Carsten (2013: 246) writes of Marshall Sahlins' (2011) idea of 'mutuality of being'.

3 *Yas, Tsus, Mah* in Mongolian Kinship

Bone, blood and flesh have long been at the heart of Mongolian kinship studies, as these are its central metaphors. Classical studies of Mongolian kinship report that persons are considered 'endowed by both parents: the bones, brain, and sinews came from the father, being transmitted in the semen; the flesh and blood came from the mother' (Vreeland 1957: 58). Matrilineal and patrilineal lines of descent are thus conceptualised through 'flesh and blood' (*mah tsus*) and 'bone' (*yas*), respectively. Recent work on Mongolian kinship, however, has questioned the bone *versus* flesh division, whether through the investigation of transformations in the use of kinship metaphors, or substantive and material-focused analyses of relatedness. Rebecca Empson's work, for example, rejects the blood *versus* bone division and instead traces the materials that manifest people's patrilineal and matrilineal ties and the ways that they are hidden or revealed at particular sites and at particular moments (Empson 2007; 2011).

Empson argues that people in Mongolia think of themselves as assemblages of 'blood *and* bone' (2011: 19, original emphasis) and demonstrates that people 'switch between affinal (blood) and consanguineal (bone) modes of relatedness' (2011: 19) as two different modalities that remain as internal elements within a person but are each brought forth or elicited in certain encounters (cf. Strathern [1987] 1992: 298).

Hwan-Young Park's study of kinship idioms argues that in post-socialist Mongolia 'blood is [now] used to signify both sides' (Park 2003: 144). Park suggests that the expansion of blood from a matrilineal idiom to an idiom of bilateral relatedness can be linked to a general shift in conceptions of relatedness away from rigid agnatic *versus* consanguineal models to those that are increasingly inclusive and flexible (cf. Humphrey & Sneath 1999: 139). Park's work on Mongolian kinship 'in practice' also foregrounds the emergence of the idiom of 'dry' (*huurai*) kinship (Park 2003: 152–155). According to Park, *huurai* bonds represent a middle ground between 'real' kin and 'non-kin': a 'fictive kinship' relation 'based more on spiritual and moral bonds' (Park 2003: 153) as opposed to either 'real'-*cum*-blood relations or 'non'-*cum*-economic ties. Park illustrates his argument with reference to a number of informants who have established *huurai* kinship relations across the city–countryside divide as these demonstrate 'the distinctive features of this relationship' (Park 2003: 153). In the examples Park presents, city residents acquire quality meat and dairy products from their countryside counterparts and can rely on their *huurai* kin for hospitality and assistance if they visit the countryside.

That the distinctiveness of *huurai* kinship relations comprises the provision of countryside meat makes them directly relevant to the enactment of kin relations through meat discussed here. Are we to understand, then, that blood relations are becoming 'dry kin' relations across city–countryside divides? Or is there a flaw in Park's analysis? While Park's three points regarding *huurai* kinship are ethnographically sound, I suggest their framing within a distinction between 'real' and 'fictive' kin and between 'moral' and 'economic' types of relationships distorts his ultimate conclusions. At heart, the issues stem not only from the widely disputed separation he assumes between moral and economic relationships, but also from the perspective underpinning his comparison of *huurai* kinship and 'real kin'; namely, the suggestion that dry kinship entails moral obligations that are 'as strong as those of real kinship in terms of people's commitment to mutual assistance' (Park 2003: 153). For not only does the framing of kinship bonds through the lens of obligation struggle to account for failure (Fox 2019b), but, as the ethnography below will demonstrate, being 'real kin' does not preclude acts of abandonment.

4 *Idesh* and Meat Ties

Badrakh and Ulzii are among the thousands of households who left the countryside over the last decade for Ulaanbaatar (IOM 2018). Most of these households have settled in the *ger* districts that once constituted the primary urban form of the city, but now largely circle Ulaanbaatar's built-up centre (Byambadorj *et al.* 2011; Fox 2019a). Aglag, the district where Badrakh and Ulzii live, is located around 12 km east of the city's central square. Meat is available in the *ger* districts in two primary locations. The first is the local shop, which sells a limited stock of frozen cuts and offal in plastic bags. The second is a small meat wholesaler at a *ger* district commercial centre. Meat is also available at one of the city's large markets, such as Narantuul or Khar Khorin. Without private transportation, however, it is hard to bring anything substantial like an entire animal carcass back to a *ger* district home like Badrakh and Ulzii's, located 15 minutes' walk from the nearest bus stop. The local shop is only around the corner from Badrakh and Ulzii's *hashaa*, but the per kilo price for meat is considered high for these small cuts. When cash is tight it is the only option, as the family cannot amass the capital to afford a whole animal. When Ulzii's salary comes in, she prefers to buy meat from the wholesaler. The provenance of this meat is easier to account for. 'All Mongolian meat is good', she tells me, 'but we prefer the meat from the East, from our own *nutag* if we can get it'.

As Ulzii says, it is preferable, when possible, to have meat from one's own homeland and, as such, meat is a key material that is moved between countryside and city along family lines (Bulag 1998: 126–8). It is given and sold by countryside relatives, sent in exchange for goods or assistance provided by *ger* district residents and brought to the city for sale at the market. *Ger* district families that have access to *idesh* [a large amount of meat slaughtered in autumn to last through the winter] may be understood to have managed to maintain relations with relatives with herds in the countryside. No longer having relatives that can send *idesh* can mean a number of things: either relations have broken down between city and country; there are no countryside relatives left to provide their city kin with meat; or those in the city have nothing to offer in return for meat. It can also be an index of the long roots a family has laid down in the city; a sign that they are no longer liminally based in the capital, even though they may still live in the *ger* district. Living without access to *idesh*, however, can also be a depressing indicator of isolation and precarity. None of the families I met in the furthest reaches of the *ger* district who live without city residence registration papers, access to government assistance,

or even being connected to the electricity grid, had countryside relatives that sent them meat. This fact reveals that recent arrivals claiming plots, whether legally or through occupation at the edges of the *ger* districts, are not necessarily more likely to have stronger links with their *nutag*. Instead, it demonstrates that meat ties across city–countryside divides are something that have to be made and maintained; they cannot be taken for granted.

Badrakh and Ulzii initially appear fortunate to have a combination of countryside relatives in Hentii province with herds and a few of their own animals. When the couple left the countryside to move to the city, they placed their handful of remaining animals with Ulzii's older half-brother, Dashgombo Ah. The terms of this arrangement were very imprecise, and the animals were immediately incorporated into Dashgombo Ah's herds (cf. Murphy 2015), but as long as the animals or their offspring remain, Badrakh and Ulzii should have the right to ask Dashgombo Ah for meat.

When possible, *ger* district residents may also participate in the autumnal preparation of winter *idesh* in the countryside. Doing so earns the right to a portion of the meat slaughtered. Providing shelter and care for the children of countryside relatives, however, is perhaps the best way for city-dwellers to acquire meat. The three sets of relatives with whom Badrakh and Ulzii had the most developed meat-based relationship were Namuun Egch and Bataa Ah, whose two children lived for over a year in a *ger* in Badrakh and Ulzii's *hashaa*; their daughter Anar and her husband Baterdene, who moved between the city and the countryside where Baterdene's parents lived with their herds; and Dashgombo Ah, whose daughter Bulgamaa lived in Badrakh and Ulzii's home while she attended university.

5 Eating the *Nutag*

Mongolia's herds – and the meat, blood and bones they provide – are seen by many to define Mongolia as a nation (Bulag 1998: 200–209). While there has been less anthropological focus on food in Mongolia, it is well known that meat is fundamental to the cuisine to the extent that people often say, 'food without meat is not food!' (*mahgüi hool, hool bish!*). For countryside and city-dwellers alike, meat – specifically the meat of the 'five domestic animals' (*tavan hoshoo mal*) – is considered utterly fundamental for sustaining physical life.⁵ As Sandrine Ruhlmann writes (2019: 44, emphasis added):

5 The tiny but growing vegetarian movement in central Ulaanbaatar could be considered the exception that proves the rule. Vegetarians may be considered like the Christian converts

Products from the herds are still the only foods that ‘nourish’ (*hoollo-*). The food that makes one feel ‘full’ (*cadsan* [*tsadsan*]) is and remains meat ... Every meal thus necessarily contains meat, if only a small amount, and can be made up of only one dish *providing that it is meat* (*mah*).

Meat is not only at the heart of Mongolian commensality; it manifests domestic hierarchies and is also a key pleasure of life (Ruhlmann 2019: 104). As with the meal that followed the slaughter of Bataa Ah’s animals, eating from a central plate of cooked meat is an integral Mongolian experience: each person with a knife in hand, slicing the tender flesh from a bone held in the other hand and bringing the morsel wedged between knife and thumb to their mouth. A child demonstrates herself to have left infancy when she masters eating meat off the bone and learns her place in the social world through meat-centred practices, such as waiting her turn for food (Michelet 2015; Ruhlmann 2019: 249). Children learn from an early age the obligation to clean a bone until it gleams only white, and crowd eagerly around older relatives waiting for one to break open a bone with the back of a knife to suck out the oily marrow.⁶ Elders are served before youngers and are entitled to specific parts (bones) of the animal (Fijn 2011: 229). Being entitled to a share of the meal is a part of being a household member, and those temporarily absent at the time of serving are reserved a bowl of food to eat when they return (Michelet 2013: 148).

Meat from different areas of Mongolia has distinctively different tastes due to the herds grazing on different wild grasses and herbs, and people know well the taste of meat from their own homeland. As Ulzii says above, those in the *ger* district often seek out meat from as near to their homeland as possible, if not from their own relatives’ herds. This desire, however, goes beyond the matter of taste preference (although this is important): for consuming this meat is a means of continuing to nurture and constitute one’s body with the substance of the *nutag*.

As anthropologists of Mongolia focus more on urban settings, there is a growing body of ethnographic material that speaks to Mongolian experiences of rural-to-urban migration (Bruun & Narangoa 2006; Højer & Pedersen 2019; Humphrey & Sneath 1999; Plueckhahn 2020; Sneath 2006b; Terbish & Rawsthorne 2016). Within these discussions, questions of belonging are still regularly framed in terms of the idea of the *nutag*: a concept that can scale

in Mongolia described by Holbraad and Pedersen (2017: 253–56) to be deliberately seeking rupture from the meaty-ties that bind people in webs of obligation.

6 If children are dutiful in cleaning bones well, the bones will reward them by making them beautiful in return (Ruhlmann 2019: 97).

between a place marked by a single stone to the entire land of Mongolia (Bumochir 2019: 163; Namsaraeva 2012: 142), but usually refers to the area of one's birth (*törsön nutag*). By being born onto a specific piece of 'earth', bathed first in a specific water and having one's placenta buried in a specific location one has one's *törsön nutag* established (Bumochir 2019: 165–8). The *nutag* is a vital Mongolian concept and much has been written on the activities through which people bind themselves to their *nutag*, particularly in relation to the veneration of ancestors and spiritual land guardians (*gazryn ezed*) who are considered the true 'owners' of the steppes (Buyandelger 2013: 232; Empson 2011: 79; Sneath 2002: 199–200; 2014: 468). Such activities ensure good (reciprocal) relations with spirits and include offerings made at stone cairns (*ovoo*), mountain worship and animal consecrations. Maintaining these relations is vital, as Mongolian herds are 'nourished by nature, not by human hands', as Ulzii tells me. Such rituals may be grand occasions or daily acts of sharing, such as offering the first part of the milk tea to the sky, placing a choice piece of fat from a newly slaughtered animal on the household altar, or bringing a god or spirit's favourite beverage to a shrine or shamanic possession.

There are many practices and methods by which urban dwellers seek to maintain or rekindle *nutag* ties as, for those who migrate to Ulaanbaatar's outskirts as adults, *ger* districts practically never replace the countryside as a person's *nutag*, even after many years of city residence. In some cases, these ties are institutionalised in the form of 'homeland associations' (*nutgiin zövlöl*) (Shagdar 2015; Sneath 2010), or mobilised for political purposes (Bonilla & Shagdar 2018). Others may continue to recite daily prayers to the deities (*savdag*) of their *nutag* or commission paintings of honoured mountains to be displayed on the top of household chests and domestic altars, alongside photographs of other *nutag* sites, exemplars and family relatives (Charlier 2020). Underrepresented in the anthropological literature, however, is the renewal of one's connection to one's *nutag* that people cultivate through the eating of livestock that have grazed on the nutritious grasses provided generously by well-cared-for spirit masters. Indeed, there are literal substantive connections at work here. By eating *nutag* meat, people make their bodies from the meat of the animals that consume the grass where their (people's and animals') ancestors have lived, died and returned to the earth.

When people eat homeland livestock, they are thus eating more than just flesh; they are *partaking* in their *nutag*, the relationality of the animals, humans and particular products of growth, care and land, and constituting themselves with that substance. For most herders, access to this most-savoured staple goes without saying. However, for those who no longer have their own animals,

who no longer live in the countryside among herds, who have moved great distances away from their birthplace, constituting one's body with the *nutag* can no longer be taken for granted. For *ger* district dwellers like Badrakh and Ulzii, anxieties revolve around being unable to access the substance of the *nutag*. Their desire to be constituted by the substance of their *nutag* through eating meat remains strong, and perhaps even intensified by the distance and feelings of peripheralisation they experience living in Ulaanbaatar's *ger* districts. No longer present to participate in the daily and ritual activities through which rural dwellers harness the fortune of being in the *nutag*, meat becomes one of the only ways to reaffirm their substantive relation with their *nutag*.

6 *Nutag* Return

For those like Badrakh and Ulzii, who live at a distance from their *törsön nutag*, opportunities to visit their homeland and receive the physical and spiritual forms of revitalisation a return can provide (Bumochir 2019; Legrain 2020; Namsaraeva 2020) are few and far between. One evening, I asked Ulzii what she thought was most important for a Mongolian person. She answered without hesitation, 'The most important is to know your ancestors, your *nutag*, where you are from.' We began to discuss the possibility of visiting Badrakh and Ulzii's *nutag* for the upcoming summer Naadam festival, something that Badrakh and Ulzii had not had the finances to do for many years. They were eager to show me the sights of which they were very proud, including the local forest abundant with wild berries, the tree that grants wishes, and the museum of Mongol queens shaped in the form of a noble woman's hat. I was likewise eager to help make the visit possible by assisting with the cost of petrol and supplies. During the preparations, Badrakh and Ulzii overflowed with excitement, listing the relatives we would visit, the old friends they would reconnect with, and already tasting the delicious *Naadam hushuur* [fried meat dumpplings] we would eat. The trip would also provide a good opportunity to collect some meat from Dashgombo Ah.

When we finally arrived in the small district centre after the long drive in Baterdene's overcrowded microbus, we put our things in the wooden house belonging to Ulzii's older sister Namuun Egch and her husband Bataa Ah (introduced in the opening paragraph). The electricity there had been disconnected, as the couple had been living out in the pastureland with their herds for recent months and had not kept up with the payments. As it was already getting dark, there was a plan to visit Dashgombo Ah at his summer pastures for the night.

We were all ready to go in Bataa Ah's old, red Jeep when Badrakh decided to call, just to check that Dashgombo Ah was home. When Badrakh called, however, Dashgombo Ah said straight away, 'We don't have any food': an extremely rude way of saying 'Don't visit'. Having been turned away by Dashgombo Ah, we returned to Bataa Ah's dark, wooden house in town, to eat instant noodles boiled on a gas burner brought from the city.

The next day, Badrakh called Dashgombo Ah to confirm that Ulzii and he would be visiting to collect some of their animals from his herd. The conversation, however, quickly turned sour. Badrakh was unable to let the events of the last 24 hours pass without comment. He said bluntly to his elder relative, 'We never asked you for food, we were just thinking of visiting. If you had only had black tea that would have been enough. If you had had nothing it wouldn't have mattered. We never asked you for food.' Insulted by Badrakh's words, Dashgombo Ah retorted coldly that Badrakh and Ulzii's animals were 'finished' and they could forget about coming to collect meat for the winter or ever being able to call on him again, as none of their animals existed any more. Ulzii was devastated by the news and blamed her husband for having spoken so tactlessly to a senior relative.

The following day, Bataa Ah brought a live sheep to the district centre. The plan was for Badrakh to butcher it for us to take back to the city the following day. That night, however, Ulzii and Badrakh attended a family gathering at the home of a relative of Ulzii's mother. Relatives on Ulzii's mother's side had called the meeting to discuss holding a 'lineage party' to honour and celebrate seven elderly relatives. The event would be held in their *nutag*, funded with money collected from each household, and would feature some sporting competitions for the young men and women of the extended family. The proposition, however, garnered little support. There had been a recent death in the family, and some felt it was too soon to celebrate. Ulzii and Badrakh joined this chorus, insisting in public that it would be inappropriate at a time of mourning, but later privately confiding that for most people the issue was financial.

When Badrakh and Ulzii eventually returned from the meeting, they found a tragic sight: the sheep Bataa Ah had tethered in the *hashaa* had been killed by a dog. Against tradition, Badrakh felt it might still be possible to save the meat and began to butcher it, but when Ulzii heard his intentions, she furiously threw the carcass behind the pit latrine and shouted at him for even suggesting such a thing.

The following morning, I woke to find Namuun Egch and Ulzii packing pieces of sheep carcass into a large plastic bag. Bataa Ah had provided yet another sheep. Although Bataa Ah's two children lived in Badrakh and Ulzii's *hashaa*, housed in their own *ger*, they had their own supply of meat from their

parents. Normally, Badrakh and Ulzii would not ask for meat from the children, and *vice versa*, although cooked food would gladly be shared. However, as Badrakh and Ulzii were transporting the children and therefore any meat that would be brought back for them back to the city, it would effectively have been impossible for Bataa Ah to provision his own children without offering something to his sister and brother-in-law. Thus, the sheep was to be portioned between us. Packed back into Baterdene's van, we left the countryside to return to the city.

Aside from the massive shock of having lost the last of their animals to the angry words of Dashgombo Ah, in fact, the entire experience of returning to their *nutag*, to which Badrakh and Ulzii had so looked forward, had been something of a disorienting disappointment. On the long drive home, Ulzii and Badrakh mused over their strange feeling of alienation from their homeland after years of absence. Their excited expectations of being reunited with friends, classmates and relatives from their youth had dulled, faced with the reality that, like them, so many have left the countryside and cannot or do not return for *Naadam* (as they also had not for many years). Their teenage sons had similarly felt the effects of growing up away from their *nutag*. The two young men had attended a dance party in the Cultural Centre one night, where one had become enraged at a local man's behaviour on the dance-floor and thrown a punch. The ensuing brawl, while largely harmless and quickly subdued, had made it clear that they were far from home and without many allies. Only the last-minute intervention of a distant relative saved them from trouble with the police.

The family thus returned to the city from their *nutag* with a variety of bruises and, following the falling-out with Dashgombo Ah, the sudden insecurity of no longer having an animal to their name. A final tragic blow came on our eventual arrival: upon unpacking, Ulzii discovered that much of the meat Bataa Ah had given them, wrapped in plastic bags for too many hours in the hot van, had gone bad (*muudsan*) and was no longer edible.

7 Thinking through *Mah*

In many ways, Badrakh and Ulzii's experience contains parallel themes to other recent ethnographies of urban-dwellers visiting their *nutag* (Bumochir 2019; Legrain 2020; Namsaraeva 2020).⁷ In most cases, 'going to *nutag*' (*nutag yavah*) is a cause for great excitement and anticipation. However, even when

⁷ Also relevant is Ariell Ahearn's (2016) account of an urban family's return to pastoralism.

such trips achieve their overall objective, anxieties regarding roles and responsibilities, conceptions of hosts and guests, and the dangers of offending locals, human and otherwise, come to the fore. For those who have left their *nutag*, both distance and return can prove problematic and highlight generational divides between rural-born Mongolians and their urban-born children (Bumochir 2019: 166; Legrain 2020: 119). The struggles Badrakh and Ulzii face in accessing *nutag* meat parallel the disquieting reality that they and the children they have raised in the *ger* districts find themselves out of place in their homeland. For, as Bernard Charlier writes (2020: 144), 'the idea of belonging to one's homeland echoes another idea according to which in Mongolia the tie between a person and a particular object is established through constant use'. As the *nutag* is more a relation than a location, the question remains to what extent the family can continue to substantiate this relation with such limited opportunities to partake in the *nutag* or even constitute their bodies with its flesh.

Reflecting further on the final events of the story above – namely, when Badrakh and Ulzii returned to the *ger* district to find the meat had begun to rot – this tragedy might seem simply contingent or unlucky, but I suggest that may not be the case. Thinking through the mouldering of the meat draws attention to the literal distance between city and countryside and the 'peripherality' of the *ger* districts. While people in the *ger* district try to maintain connections to the countryside even as they seek to build them in the city, *ger* district life has a way of disrupting ties that can lead to a paradoxical form of isolation, paradoxical because one becomes surrounded by many more people in the city, and yet can struggle to find the connections to make a living or establish a sense of belonging (Charlier 2020; Terbish & Rawsthorne 2016). For most people in the *ger* districts, their presence there is indicative of separation from an animal-based subsistence and access to *nutag* meat only through kin ties. Stretching the perspective, one could say that the meat mouldered *because* Badrakh and Ulzii live in the *ger* district. The meat was only being transported in Baterdene's van because the family live in a place that not only exists at a physical distance from the countryside, but one that demands distinctive types of relational enactions: namely those of meat.

Recall the family meeting that kept Badrakh and Ulzii occupied while the sheep, tethered at Bataa Ah's place, was being mauled by the dog (a form of slaughter that did produce meat, but in a form unsuitable for human consumption). For Badrakh and Ulzii, the sad result of being held up at the meeting was the loss of yet another share of *nutag* meat, but the need for the meeting and its failure also reveal something about meat as a relation-making substance

across city–countryside divides. This development is taking place as other methods, such as the lineage party, grow less effective. Interestingly, however, blood-based relations return here in new and anxiety-inducing ways. For, as was mentioned at the meeting, the dispersal of so many relatives throughout Ulaanbaatar's *ger* districts has led to the disquieting reality that the younger generations do not get to know each other. Without establishing substantive bonds, it is not impossible to imagine that hidden blood ties might go unrecognised, and lead to inadvertent incest, a not uncommon source of anxiety in Mongolia. Indeed, the form of the relation that meat-sharing ties generate might even increase this possibility as city–countryside bonds become increasingly atomised and dispersal and economic hardship preclude participation in larger forms of kin gatherings.

This point is also indexed in the meat that arrives in the *ger* district. Like the meat of the *nutag*, obligations among those who share blood may be venerated as an ideal, but enacting those obligations is rarely straightforward. Separated from an animal-based subsistence and with only indirect access to *nutag* meat, Badrakh and Ulzii try to maintain their substantive connections with their homeland through the eating of *nutag* meat, but are often left with little choice but to buy pieces of animals whose parts have lost all connection. Shop-bought meat in the city does not contain the *nutag*; it has become simply dismembered pieces of flesh. In Mongolia, where meat is much more than simple sustenance, anxieties over the provenance of the meat with which one nourishes one's family are profound. Not knowing where the meat is from produces an analogous anxiety over where people are from or even *who they are*.

The affordances of animals and food as kin-making substances are well studied, both in Mongolia and throughout the anthropological literature. Sharing a meal is fundamental to household bonds and a primary means of hospitably enacting inter-household ties, while living animals manifestly enact growth, producing 'renewable substances' such as milk, wool and offspring. Meat, I suggest, sits somewhere in the space between the two: a form of animal that no longer grows, and a form of food, not yet ready for consumption. Far from static, meat, perhaps even more than animals or food, can be considered not only particularly fragile but imbued with uncertain potential. Like the meat of the *nutag*, obligations among those who share blood remain venerated as an ideal, but flesh and blood are notoriously perishable. In the same way that the meat was vulnerable to going mouldy on the long journey, perhaps conceptions of what it means to be kin may likewise find themselves denatured by the time they reach the outskirts of the capital, transformed by the switch from relations centred on animals to those enacted by their flesh.

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